



PUTTING RESEARCH TO WORK

BRIEF

Learning the Best Ways to Communicate with Locals

In 2001 the Wisconsin Department of Transportation implemented an outreach initiative to enhance awareness of, and compliance with, a new statute requiring localities to rate and report road conditions. Municipalities were contacted via multiple communication methods. Compliance exceeded 99%, though there was neither a direct incentive nor a penalty. While the program was successful, there was little knowledge of the specifics responsible for the success.

Research Objectives

During the outreach initiative, localities were contacted through direct mail, e-mail, workshops at statewide conferences, articles in association newsletters and magazines, and local and regional meetings. The extent to which each method was applied depended on the type of municipality. This research assessed the effectiveness of each communication tactic and recommended strategies for future outreach campaigns aimed at local governments.

Results

Researchers conducted qualitative interviews with outreach participants, followed by a statewide quantitative survey of municipalities. They found that about 94% of localities preferred learning about new state programs, rules and requirements through letters. They also found that cities and counties like e-mail and conference workshops, while towns are more likely to rely on association newsletters and local meetings. Detailed findings for each locality type include:

Counties:

- Mail—Proved important for providing technical information and generating compliance.
- E-mail—Used infrequently to deliver information about the regulation. E-mail would be effective for transmitting relatively simple information of this type.
- Articles—Very useful for providing detail and technical information, but not for compliance.
- Workshops—Very important for providing technical information and detail, and for compliance.
- Meetings—Moderately important and useful for information delivery and compliance.

Cities:

- Mail—Important for providing technical information and generating compliance.
- E-mail—Used infrequently to deliver information about the regulation. E-mail would serve well as an addition to other methods.
- Articles—Not very important for compliance; very useful for providing detail and technical information.
- Workshops—Moderately important for compliance and providing technical information and detail.
- Meetings—Moderately important for compliance and information delivery.

Villages:

- Mail—Very important for compliance and providing technical information.
- E-mail—Used infrequently to deliver information about the regulation; not enough villages have e-mail for this to be effective.
- Articles—Not very important; the association was not a primary information source for most village representatives.
- Workshops—Less than half of village officials received any information at statewide conferences.
- Meetings—Very important for receiving technical information, especially without an active association.

Investigators

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*“Emphasize
effective
communication;
make compliance
quick, smooth and
easy...and you
will achieve
compliance.”*

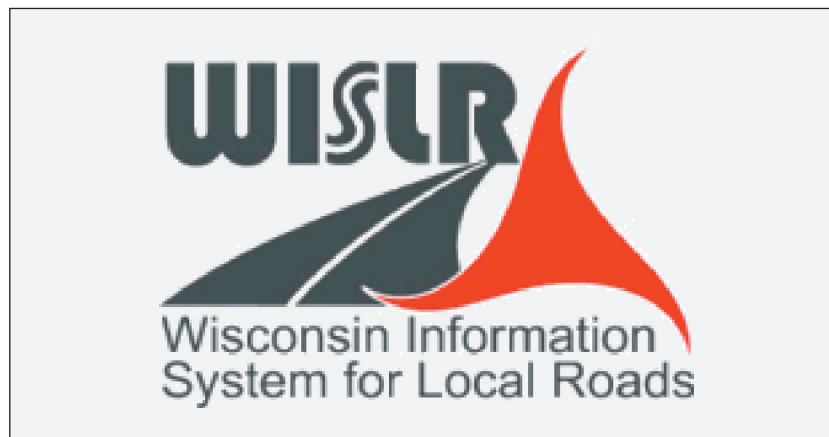
—Larry Shiman
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Project Manager



"This project enabled us to capture what communication strategies worked best for different kinds of local governments."

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Towns:

- Mail—Important, though not as crucial as for other types of municipalities.
- E-mail—Used infrequently to deliver information about the regulation; not enough towns have e-mail for this to be effective.
- Articles—More than two-thirds of towns received information this way. Many found them important for compliance and useful for receiving technical information.
- Workshops—Moderately important for compliance and providing technical information and detail.
- Meetings—Important for compliance and receiving information.

Municipalities also reported that they:

- Complied with the new regulation because it was required (63%).
- Would be at least somewhat likely to view information about regulations online (75%).
- Would prefer that WisDOT contact come through a district office (counties, 73%; cities, 62%).

Recommendations

WisDOT should adopt a layered approach to communication that uses a variety of methods. While direct mail seems best suited for generating program awareness, this method alone cannot generate program support. Developing effective motivational communication will require some “experiential” learning. Local and statewide conferences and meetings, training sessions and demonstrations are useful experiential vehicles.

In addition, message content is important. Communications should move beyond generating awareness and incorporate persuasive messages that demonstrate the benefits of the program.

Benefits

The findings of this project will greatly benefit WisDOT and other public agencies that wish to communicate effectively with local units of government about programs and generate support. The department plans to launch a communication/implementation project to advise staff about the report findings and recommendations. The more the public associates WisDOT with beneficial programs, the greater the support for the department across the state.

This brief summarizes Project 0092-03-08, “Local Roads Communication Analysis,” produced by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation Research, Development & Technology Transfer Program, 4802 Sheboygan Ave., Madison, WI 53707.

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